



**U.S DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION**

WHO APPEALS?

**DEMOGRAPHICS AND OTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF
VETERANS WHO APPEAL THE DECISION
ON THEIR CLAIM**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Approximately 12 percent of women and 22 percent of men appealed the decisions on their claims.
- Veterans with a higher education are more likely than those with a lower education to appeal the decisions on their claims. About 23 percent of veterans with some college or technical school appealed compared to veterans with less than a high school degree (13.6 percent).
- Middle aged veterans were the most likely to appeal the decisions on their claims.
- Veterans who served in the Vietnam Era were the most likely to appeal the decisions on their claims (24 percent).
- Veterans who filed a Re-opened Compensation Claim were the most likely to appeal (32.7 percent) whereas veterans who filed an Initial Survivors Pension Claim (6.3 percent) were the least likely to appeal.
- Of those veterans who appealed, 31.5 percent received help from a Veterans Service Organization. About 13 percent received help from neither a VSO nor a state or county office.
- Veterans who appealed were less likely to answer positively on specific claims questions (for example, VA completely or mostly explaining the steps necessary to process a claim, 44.1 percent) compared to more general questions (for example, VA employees were very or generally helpful, 52 percent).
- Almost half of the veterans who appealed the decisions on their claims (45.9 percent) felt they had fair or poor knowledge of VA benefits.

INTRODUCTION

In December of 1996, the Veterans Benefits Administration's Compensation and Pension (C&P) Service issued a report on Reengineering Claims Processing with a new and improved outlook for handling veterans' disability compensation and pension claims. This business process reengineering (BPR) effort identified new goals to ensure that every veteran gets a fair and timely decision on his or her claim for benefits with the focus above all on service to the veteran. VBA felt it necessary to make the veteran a partner in the claims process for improved timeliness, quality, and responsiveness.

A core problem with the current claims process is that there is inadequate communication between the veteran and VBA. The process flow for an original claim involves six basic steps or tasks. In this flow, the veteran's claims can be handed off twelve different times among at least nine different people at the regional office. This equates to a lengthy procedure for the veteran while filing his or her claim.

After receiving the decision on their initial claim, the veteran can decide whether or not to appeal. If they choose to do so, they file a notice of disagreement (NOD). A decision review officer (DRO) would then be assigned to them. The DRO would have the authority to issue a revised favorable decision based on a review of evidence. If the veteran remains dissatisfied, the DRO can help prepare the veteran's claim for a formal appeal. It would then be forwarded to the Board of Veterans Appeals. If the veteran decides to appeal the claim, this can lead to an even longer period for the veteran to wait before he or she receives a claim decision.

This report will help the Veterans Benefits Administration's C&P Service to identify who appeals the decision on their claim and how they feel about other issues in the Compensation and Pension claims process.

METHODOLOGY

Data for the 1998 *Survey of Veterans' Satisfaction With the VA Compensation and Pension Claims Process* were collected from 57 regional offices (ROs), excluding Manila and the Philippines, between October 1998 and January 1999. The survey sample for each RO was selected to provide a cross-section of veterans or their families who had recently received a decision on a claim or whose claims were still pending.

The following benefits are represented in the sample:

010	Initial Disability Compensation Claim (8 or more issues)
020	Reopened Compensation Claim
110	Initial Disability Compensation Claim (less than 8 issues)
120	Reopened Pension Claim
130	Dependency Issue
140	Initial Survivors Compensation, DIC, or Death Compensation
150	Income, Estate, or Election Issue
180	Initial Disability Pension Claim
190	Initial Survivors Pension Claim

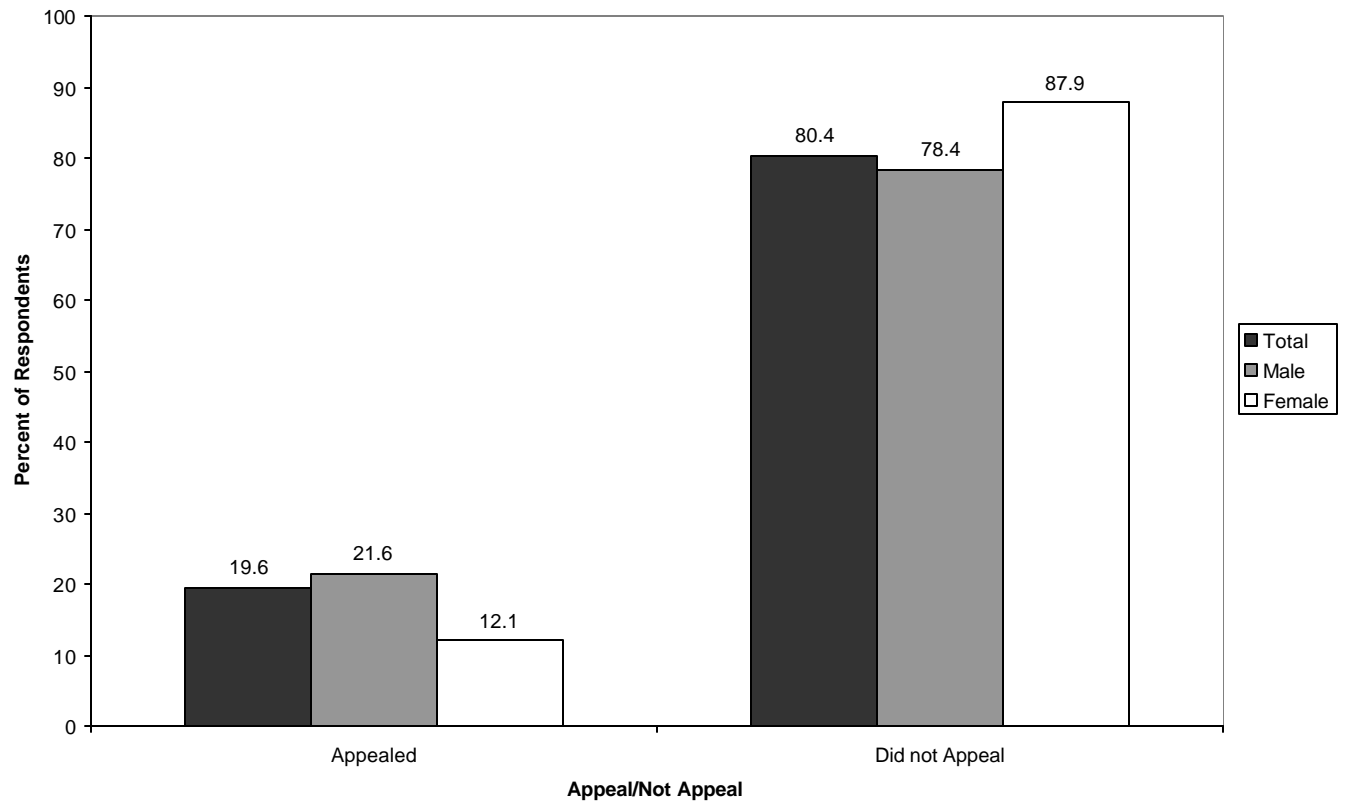
These nine end products were selected on the basis of their relatively high contribution to the VA RO staff workload and because they were initiated by the claimant rather than VA. Samples were drawn to match as closely as possible the distribution of end products within each RO. The sampling method was also designed to have about one-third of the cases represent pending claims and two-thirds representing completed claims. The distribution of the sample by end product reflects the proportionate distribution (within the nine end product categories) of claims completed during the 12 months prior to July 31, 1998.

The goal of the 1998 survey was to obtain 400 completed surveys for each regional office. Assuming a 60 percent response rate, approximately 700 potential respondents per RO were needed to reach this goal. Approximately 384 responses were needed to yield a margin of error of ± 5 percentage points, assuming a 95 percent confidence interval, at the RO level.

The overall response rate for the 1998 survey administration, considering all 57 surveyed regional offices, was approximately 58 percent. The average number of completed surveys within each regional office was 395, and the total number of cases considering all surveyed regional offices was about 22,500.

RESULTS

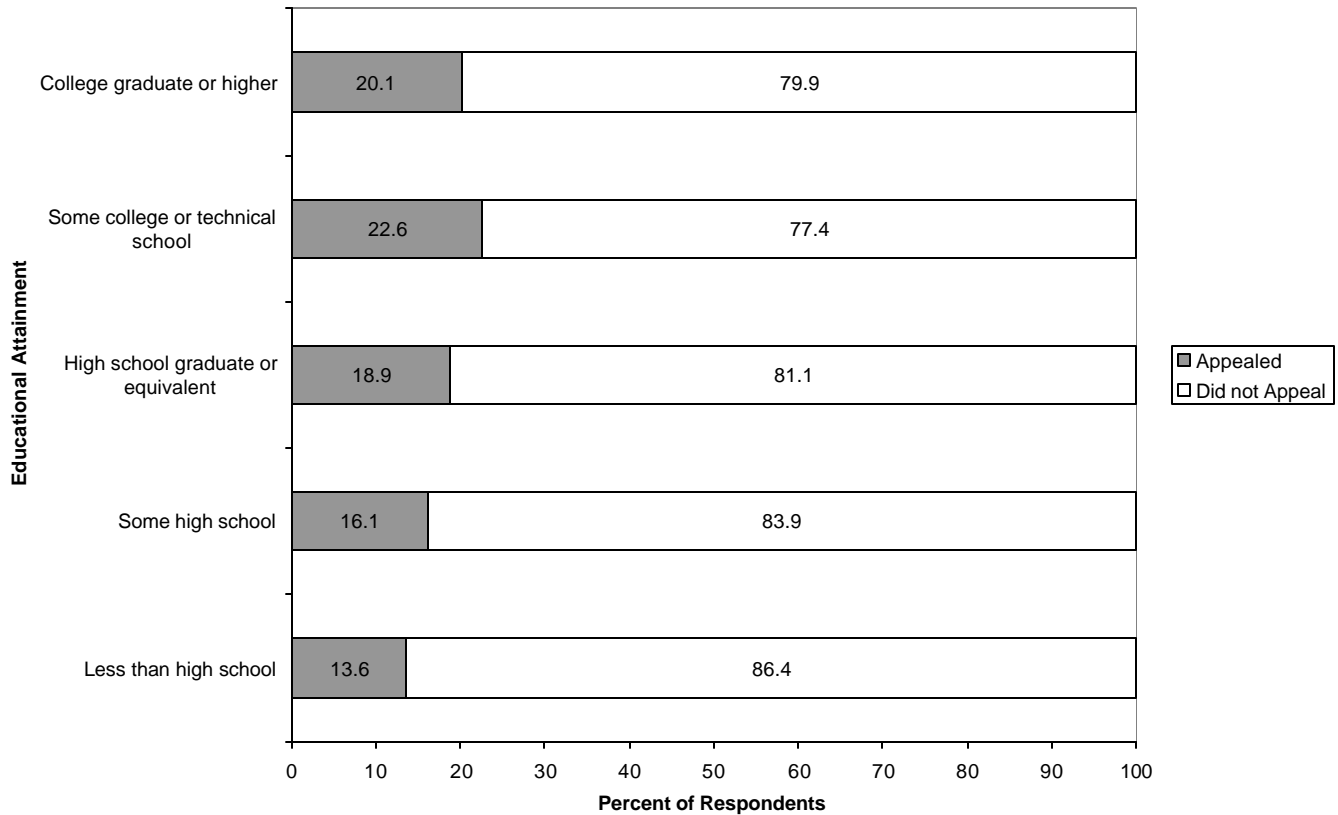
CHART 1: Gender of Respondents



- A total of 19.6 percent (n = 2816) of the respondents appealed the decision on their claim. Significantly more men than women appealed the decisions on their claims.
- Approximately 21 percent of the respondents were women. Of these women, 12.1 percent appealed the decisions on their claims.
- About 79 percent of the respondents were men. Of these men, 21.6 percent appealed the decisions on their claims.

RESULTS

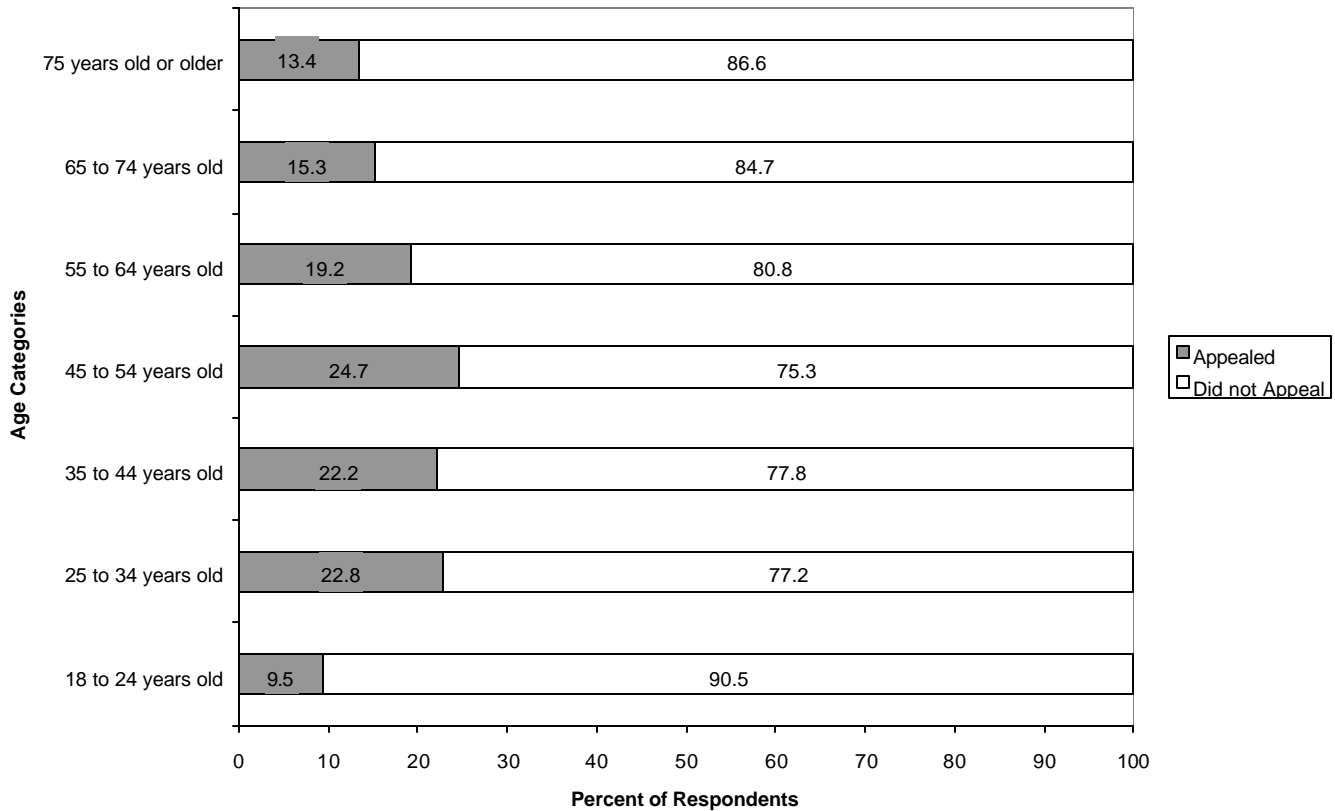
CHART 2: Educational Level of Respondents



- Only 13.6 percent of veterans with less than a high school degree appealed the decisions on their claims compared to 18.9 percent who had a high school degree or an equivalent of one. Approximately 16 percent of veterans with at least some high school appealed.
- Veterans who had a higher education were more likely to appeal the decisions on their claims. About 23 percent of veterans who had some college or technical school and 20.1 percent of veterans who were college graduates or higher appealed the decisions on their claims.

RESULTS

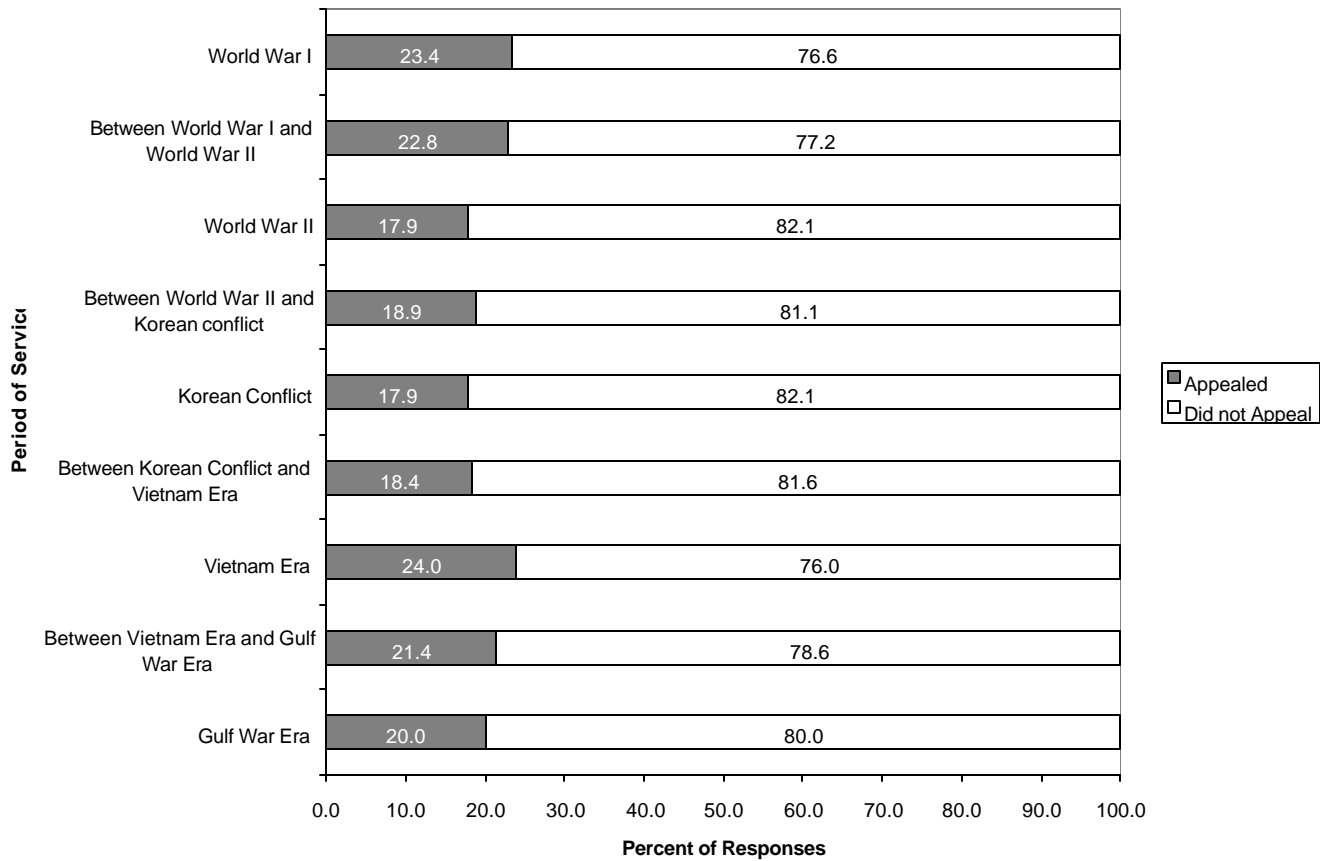
CHART 3: Age of Respondents



- Middle-aged veterans were the most likely to appeal the decisions on their claims. Those veterans who were 45 to 54 years old were the most likely (24.7 percent) to appeal. About 22 percent of 35 to 44 year olds and 19.2 percent of 55 to 64 year olds appealed the decisions on their claims.
- Those veterans who were 75 years of age or older were more likely to appeal the decision on their claim (13.4 percent) compared to veterans who were 18 to 24 years old (9.5 percent).

RESULTS

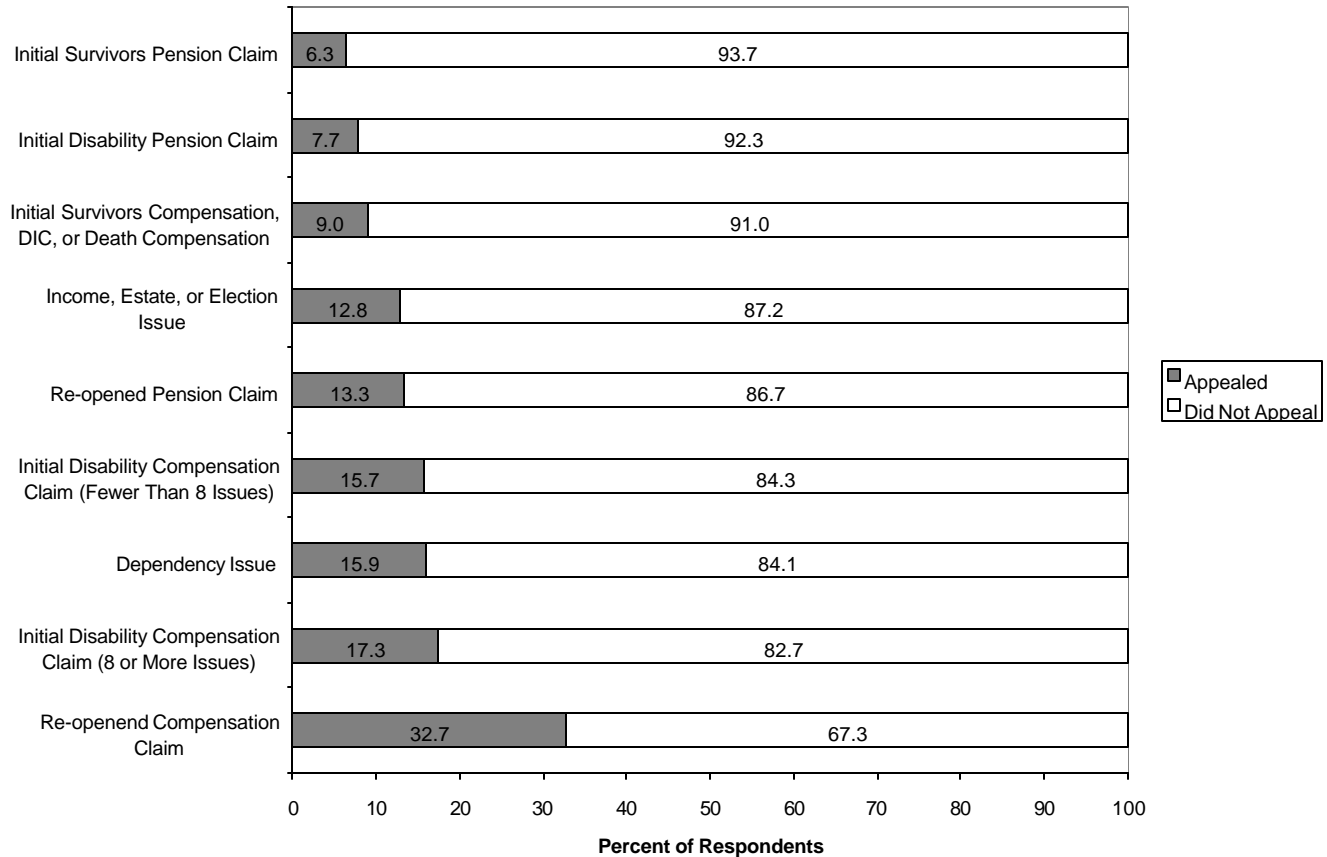
CHART 4: Service Period of Respondents



- NOTE: The periods of service before World War II have very small numbers of respondents, therefore the percentages shown should be viewed with caution.
- Veterans from the Vietnam Era were the most likely to appeal the decisions on their claims (24 percent), followed by veterans who served between the Vietnam Era and the Gulf War Era (21.4 percent) and veterans who served in the Gulf War Era (20 percent).

RESULTS

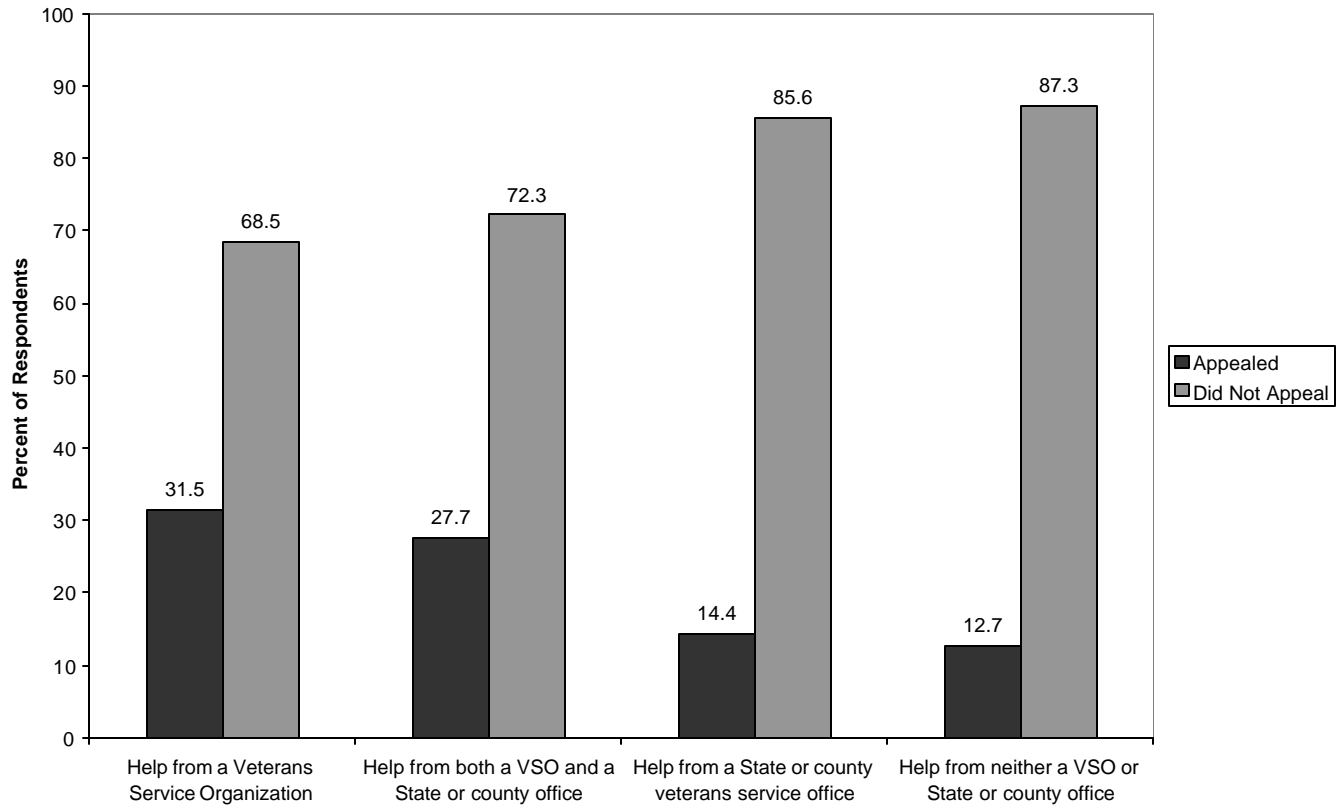
CHART 5: End Products



- About 33 percent of veterans who filed a Re-opened Compensation Claim appealed the decisions on their claims followed by 17.3 percent of those who filed an Initial Disability Compensation Claim (8 or more issues).
- Of those veterans who filed an Initial Disability Compensation Claim (fewer than 8 issues), 15.7 percent appealed while 15.9 percent of those who filed a Dependency Issue appealed the decisions on their claims.
- The benefit with the smallest percentage of veterans appealing was the Initial Survivors Pension Claim (6.3 percent).

RESULTS

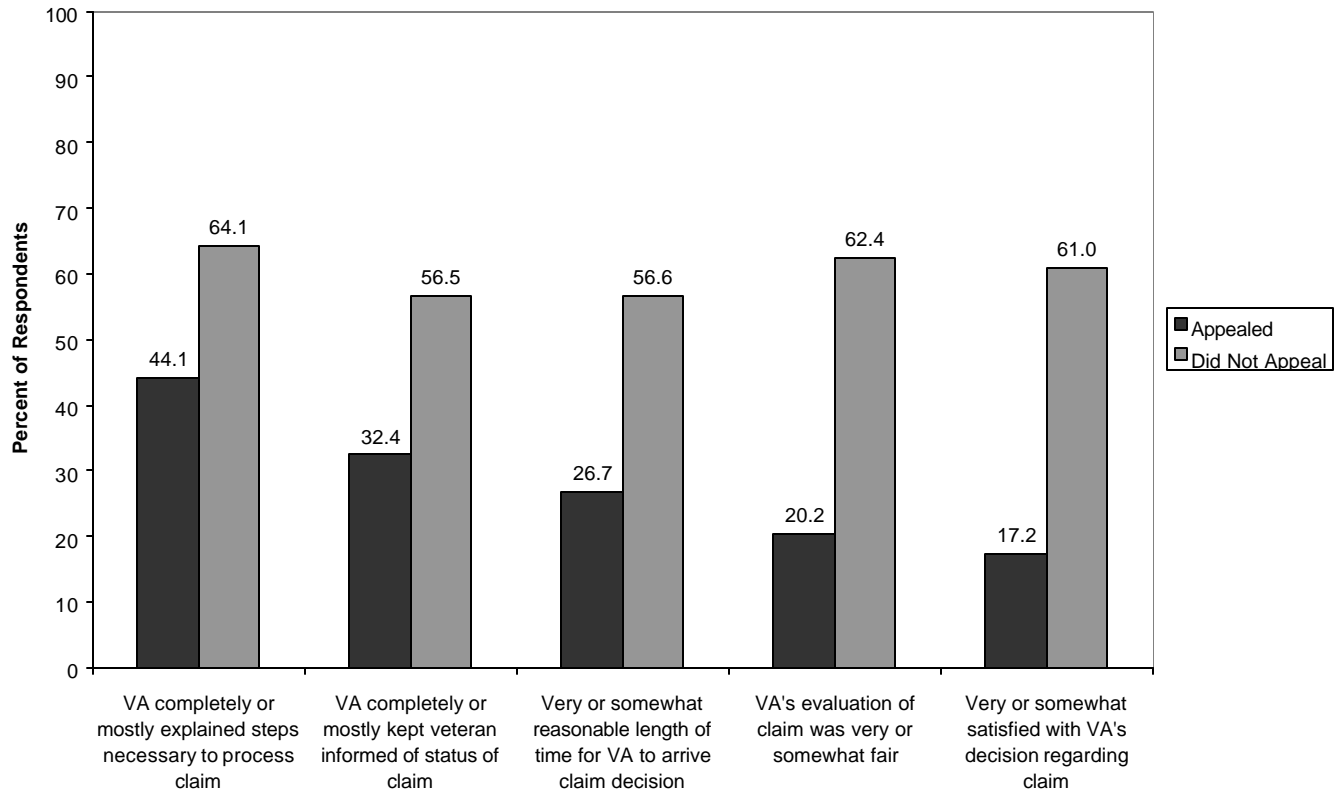
CHART 6: Type of Help Received by Veterans



- The percentage of respondents who have appealed the decisions on their claims is much higher for those who received help from a Veterans Service Organization (31.5 percent) or both a VSO and a state or county office (27.7 percent) than for those who only received help from a state or county office (14.4 percent) or for those who did not receive help from either a VSO or a state or county office (12.7 percent).

RESULTS

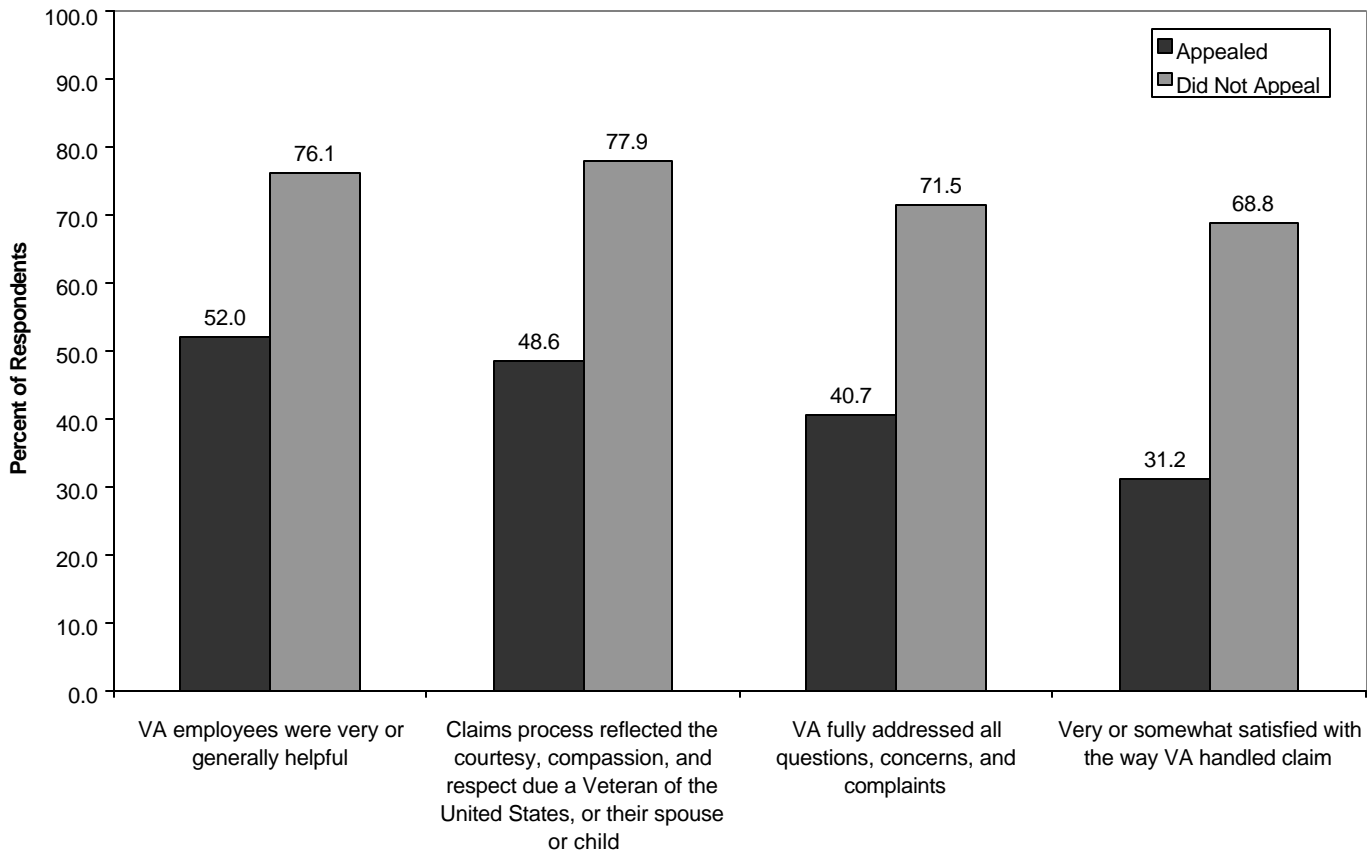
CHART 7: Percent with Positive Response on Selected Items



- In each case, veterans who did not appeal responded more positively compared to veterans who did appeal. The most positive item revealed that 44.1 percent of the veterans responded that VA completely or mostly explained the steps necessary to process a claim. 32.4 percent of the veterans who appealed said that VA completely or mostly kept them informed of the status of their claim, compared with 56.5 percent of veterans who did not appeal.
- Just over one-quarter of the veterans who appealed (26.7 percent) thought that the length of time for VA to arrive at a claim decision was very or somewhat reasonable.
- Not surprisingly, only 20.2 percent of veterans who appealed thought that VA's evaluation of their claim was very or somewhat fair and only 17.2 percent were very or somewhat satisfied with VA's decision regarding their claim.

RESULTS

CHART 8: Percent with Positive Response on Selected Items



- Veterans who appealed were more positive about items that asked more general, overall questions compared to those questions that focused on the claims process.
- Of those veterans who appealed, over half (52 percent) responded that VA employees were very or generally helpful. About 49 percent said that the claims process reflected the courtesy, compassion, and respect due a Veteran of the United States, or their spouse or child.
- Again, of those veterans who appealed, 40.7 percent said that VA fully addressed all questions, concerns, and complaints. Yet only 31.2 percent were very or somewhat satisfied with the way VA handled their claim.

CONCLUSION

It seems as if some veterans feel more comfortable and confident with appealing the decision on their claim. Men were more likely than women to have appealed the decisions on their claims. More veterans with higher educational levels appealed than those with lower educational levels. Veterans who were between the ages of 35 to 64 years old were the most likely to appeal. Those veterans who served during the Vietnam Era and who filed Re-opened Compensation Claims were more likely to appeal the decisions on their claims compared to those who served in other periods or filed other claims. Finally, more veterans who received help from a Veterans Service Organization appealed the decisions on their claims than veterans who received help from a state or county office, from both a VSO and a state or county office, or from neither a VSO nor a state or county office.

While it is important to look at the demographics of who is appealing, it is also necessary to view how the veterans who appeal feel about the compensation and pension claims process. Over half of the veterans who did not appeal the decisions on their claims responded positively to the selected items. As was mentioned before and not surprisingly, only 20.2 percent of the veterans who appealed felt that the VA's evaluation of the claim was very or somewhat fair and 17.2 percent felt that they were very satisfied with VA's decision regarding the claim.

While there is still room for improvement, 44.1 percent of veterans who appealed and 64.1 percent of veterans who did not appeal felt that VA completely or mostly explained the steps necessary to process the claims. Approximately 32 percent of veterans who appealed and 56.5 percent of veterans who did not appeal felt that VA completely or mostly kept them informed of the status of their claim. Also, 40.7 percent of veterans who appealed and 71.5 percent of veterans who did not appeal felt that VA fully addressed all questions, concerns, and complaints.

The most positive aspects for VA were that 52 percent of veterans who appealed and 76.1 percent of veterans who did not appeal felt that VA employees were very or generally helpful. Again, there is still room for improvement. While 77.9 percent of veterans who did not appeal felt that the claims process reflected the courtesy, compassion, and respect due to a veteran of the United States, only 48.6 percent of veterans who did appeal felt the same way.

Communication between VA and the veteran who appeals the decision on his or her claim can be improved in many aspects. Some aspects include explaining the steps necessary to process the claim, keeping the veteran informed of the status of their claim, fully addressing all questions concerns and complaints, strengthening the veteran's knowledge of VA benefits, and explaining the VA process clearly. Overall, veterans who appeal the decisions on their claims are much less likely to be satisfied with the way their claim was handled compared to veterans who do not appeal the decisions on their claims. By improving the communication between VA and the veteran, this could possibly be improved.